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RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHRAN IMMEDIATE 0430
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 000037

NOFORN
SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: MISH'AL IN RIYADH, BUT IRAN IS THE REAL FOCUS

REF: A. 09 RIYADH 1683
[1](#)B. 09 RIYADH 841 (NODIS)

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Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith for
reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY:

[1](#)1. (C) Egyptian President Mubarak, Palestinian Authority President Abbas, the Turkish Foreign Minister and Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khalid Mish'al visited Riyadh in the past two weeks, reflecting a renewed Saudi push on Palestinian and intra-Arab reconciliation, aimed ultimately at blunting Iranian influence in the region. The consultations do not appear to have resulted in concrete gains --yet-- but Mish'al's visit signaled an end to the Saudi cold shoulder that followed the collapse of the Saudi-brokered Palestinian reconciliation (the so-called Mecca Accords) in 2007. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal staged a joint press conference with Mish'al, explaining to reporters that the visit was "necessary to remove any doubt concerning Hamas cooperation with Iran in supporting rebels in Yemen." Mish'al declared that Hamas "stood with the Kingdom in maintaining the peace and security of its borders." He added that Palestinian factions were close to agreement on an Egyptian proposal for reconciliation, stressing that any deal would be sealed only in Cairo. End summary.

SAUDI DIPLOMATIC PUSH

[1](#)2. (C) In the last two weeks, a parade of key Middle East Peace (MEP) stakeholders paid calls in Riyadh, reflecting a renewed Saudi diplomatic push in support of Palestinian and intra-Arab reconciliation. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak visited Riyadh on December 22-23, followed by Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on December 29 (ref a). Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu made his first official visit to Riyadh on January 2 and the next day Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khalid Mish'al arrived, to meet with Saudi FM Saud. On October 4, FM Saud flew to Kuwait to begin briefing GCC leaders on developments; he will reportedly continue to Damascus on January 5. (NOTE: A concurrent visit by Afghan Second Vice President Abdulkarim Khalili, suggesting developments on the Afghan front, will be reported septel. End note.)

MISH'AL COMES TO MAKE AMENDS BY...

13. (C) This was Mish'al's first official visit since 2007 (though he did come for Umrah during Ramadan), the last time King Abdullah tried his hand at Palestinian mediation, with the failed "Mecca Accords." Since then the Saudis had made clear their exasperation with the movement's leaders and had broken ranks with other Arabs to condemn the Hamas takeover of Gaza, and even blamed Hamas intransigence at the outset of the Israeli offensive against Gaza in January 2009. Popular outrage against the offensive caused a shift in SAG rhetoric, however, and King Abdullah publicly castigated all Palestinian factions for their disunity at the Arab League summit in Kuwait the following month. Senior Saudi officials emphasized, however that they were not prepared to go beyond rhetorical exhortations and would leave the mediating to the Egyptians. Observers were therefore surprised by the sight of FM Saud holding a joint press conference with Mish'al on January 3 only days following the visit of Mahmoud Abbas.

...DENYING SUPPORT FOR THE HOUTHIS?

14. (U) Whereas Abbas was accorded full head of state honors, and met with the King, Crown Prince and other senior royals, the Saudis were at pains to show that the Mish'al visit was more limited, at least in public. Mish'al met only with the Foreign Minister, and the SAG staged a press conference to publicly explain Mish'al's purpose: Saud told reporters that the visit was "necessary to remove any doubt concerning the movement's cooperation with Iran in supporting rebels in Yemen." Mish'al added his own categorical denial that Hamas had assisted the Houthis, saying, "we could not side with

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anyone targeting Arab security whether in the Kingdom or Yemen." Responding to a question from Okaz, Mish'al declared that Hamas "stood with the Kingdom in maintaining the peace and security of its borders."

AND NO MEDIATION

15. (U) Regarding a Saudi role in mediating between Palestinian factions, FM Saud insisted that, while the Kingdom "was at the forefront of Arab states working for the Palestinian cause," there was no connection between the visits of Abbas and Mish'al. The Prince urged Palestinian factions to respond quickly to the latest Egyptian initiative "to give hope back to the Palestinians."

THOUGH A DEAL MAY BE CLOSE

16. (U) For his part, Mish'al claimed that Fatah and Hamas were "close to an agreement," though Hamas still had reservations about the Egyptian proposal. "We want this document to conform to what we have agreed with our brothers in Fatah and the other Palestinian organizations, Mish'al said. "We will then be ready to sign it in Cairo, with the others."

IT'S ALL REALLY ABOUT IRAN

17. (S/NF) In a readout on Mish'al's visit for A/DCM on January 4, MFA Western Affairs Director Dr. Ra'ed Krimly denied that the SAG was back in the Palestinian mediation business. "We are willing to talk to Hamas, but if we talk it is to encourage them to go along with the Egyptian plan." Instead, Krimly explained, Mish'al's visit should be understood in the context of the regional diplomatic initiative launched by King Abdullah at the 2009 Arab League Summit in Kuwait, aimed at repairing regional relations, promoting Palestinian unity following the Gaza conflict, and

strengthening Arab unity. With Saudi-Syrian rapprochement solidified, Krimly explained, regional players were now focused on repairing the rift between Cairo and Damascus, to restore the traditional Riyadh-Cairo-Damascus axis and strengthen Arab unity. Palestinian reconciliation was only one benefit that could come from repairing ties with Syria. (Comment: Deputy FM Dr. Prince Turki argued similarly last June that the road to Palestinian unity went through Damascus - ref b. End comment). "Iran will continue to attempt to sabotage all efforts," Krimly asserted, "and this is why it is important to reach a full rapprochement with Syria." Probing for USG views on Palestinian reconciliation, Krimly recalled that a recent USG visitor had suggested that the US opposed a reconciliation agreement at a time when "Abbas was weak." A/DCM responded by stressing the need to continue to support the PA, noting ongoing Saudi financial assistance and urging additional resources. Krimly was non-committal.

AND PROSPECTS FOR PEACE?

18. (C) Krimly told A/DCM that the SAG remained in listening mode as far as Israeli-Palestinian negotiations were concerned. As Prince Saud had reiterated many times, negotiations required a U.S. articulation of the elements of a final settlement - "which are known to all." Krimly volunteered that President Mubarak had detected some new "flexibility" in his recent discussions with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, but in the Saudi opinion, this did not amount to much in view of the continued construction in Jerusalem. U.S. assurances were necessary precisely to counter such actions -- the Palestinians needed "political cover" to be able to begin negotiations in the absence of a total freeze on settlements. Such a strategy might enable discussions regarding borders, Krimly speculated, noting that the Saudis would support whatever was agreed upon by both sides on every issue except Jerusalem. On this issue, he underscored, the Saudis had a stake, and would only accept a solution that included Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state.

COMMENT: THE GOAL IS IRAN, THE STRATEGY IS ARAB UNITY

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19. (C) Given the Saudis painful --and unsuccessful-- history in trying to mediate among the Palestinians, their claims that the successive Abbas and Mish'al visits were not part of a new Saudi initiative are plausible. Since the 2009 Kuwait Arab League summit, King Abdullah has been systematically working to shore up Arab unity as a means to reduce Iranian influence in the region. Khalid Mish'al's "assurances" that Hamas did not provide assistance to the Houthis -- also plausible -- and his support for "Arab security" were important in that regard. The joint press conference was likely intended as a rebuff to Iran and a message on Arab unity. We expect that the Saudis will continue to leave mediating between Fatah and Hamas to the Egyptians, while they focus their attention on what they see as a more important regional strategy: forging stronger ties between Damascus, Cairo and Riyadh to check Iranian power, with (the preferred option) or without (the feared option) Arab-Israeli peace.

SMITH